Sandy is Still Here

November 7, 2012 By Aundaray Guess

I have to admit that I took Hurricane Sandy for granted. There was almost an expectation of the coming storm as you were hoping to have a three day weekend. Watching the 24 hour coverage of the red swirl as the meteorologist described the storm making its way up the east coast made me get prepared. Yet instead of making sure that we were stocked on basic necessities such as water and batteries, my preparedness came in the form of wondering what movies to watch and what sugary delights to bake in the oven. I even took my dog down by the Hudson River so I could see for myself the waves crashing on the shore as ships in the distance started to hunker down. Of course in this day and age everything we witness has to be filmed on our camera phone of which I was guilty of. Ironically the only one who had sense that day was my dog who gave me the look as if to say, "You seriously putting us in harm's way to post something on Facebook?" As the wind picked up and my dog's eye got wider, I got the point and made my way to shelter.

Then the storm came.

Living uptown, except for the wind, it didn't feel like there was a storm. Maybe because we were so entranced with watching the marathon session of Dexter that we were oblivious to what was going on outside. The most exciting part of the storm in our area was two trees that fell. One landed almost on top of a friend's car and the other tree landed in the park that flattened two benches. Surrounding the tree were smiling couples holding their lattes as they took pictures of themselves next to the uprooted bark. At that moment it was all fun and games. Then the true effect of the storm started to come in.

The hope we didn't have to go to work came true but at the expense of the transportation system which was crippled in New York City. To put this in perspective, most people in the city don't own cars as there's a heavy reliance on the subway and buses that bring people to wherever they need to go. This includes those who are HIV positive. In addition many homes and business especially in the outer boroughs were either destroyed or heavily damaged and had no power. Within the city many agencies that provided services to HIV clients were unable to open for business as they also had no power or received extensive water damage.

Stories are coming in of HIV clients who live in the Bronx walking for miles to parts of Manhattan to get the basics such as food and water, something that others like myself took for granted. Some agencies like GMHC tried to open on a limited basis as they had staff that couldn't make it in with the lack of transportation or experiencing outages within the building. As one HIV agency puts it, they opened for a day and saw around 30 people, when they opened two days later it had doubled to 60. Here at GMAD clients not only had difficulties making it here to the agency but since the storm came the phones have been down and remain down leaving clients with limited ability to contact their mental health therapist or seek support in the HIV group they attended. Those who struggle with isolation are isolated from those who can help.

Sandy had come-a-calling and she left reminders that she was here. Although it's been a week since her visit the devastation of her visit is a daily reminder for many. I won't say any one group was affected more than others but looking at those who are HIV and who falls in a low economic bracket you get a sense of the reality of what happened. Food and shelter remains something that is difficult to attain for many. Even in areas not hard hit by water, there are many buildings that have no heat as the weather starts to take a dip. Ali Forney, an agency that serviced homeless LGBT youth saw their space become uninhabitable and the haven where youth could find shelter, food and showers is no longer available. Then there's simple the stress of it all. As people are still trying to get things back to normal they have the added burden of maintaining their health.

After personally seeing the effect of Sandy I no longer take her for granted. The little inconvenience of standing on a crowded subway train that is finally working pales to what others are going through. As the more heavily damaged areas are getting the media coverage little is said of the men and women who depend on certain HIV related services. In this world of short attention span and with the elections now over we can't simply move on and forget. But using the example of HIV members who walked from the Bronx to Manhattan it shows the reliance and undeterred spirit of not letting this storm stand in the way of their health and needs.

I believe for those who are fortunate we can show the same. We can show this by contacting agencies that service the HIV community and ask what we can do. We can donate food, clothes, and our time to help bring back some normalcy. And this is the perfect time to check on our neighbors and friends and especially those who are HIV positive and perhaps offer a place where they can store and take their HIV medication until their housing which was affected by the storm, is resolved. Or as the days get shorter we can offer a candlelight of care and compassion to help illuminate that someone cares. The simplest thing we can do is take someone out for coffee and let them know you are there.

As the saying goes when it comes to HIV we're all affected. Hurricane Sandy has shown that we can't take things for granted, whether it's the services we depend on, the support systems we rely on or the people in our lives. By us reaching out we can help those help others. Let's show Sandy who's boss!

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